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## Imperialist Nostalgia in Masters's To the Coral Strand

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### **Volume 14 Issue 1 (March 2012) Article 4**

**Mehmet Fikret Ararguç,**

**"Imperialist Nostalgia in Masters's *To the Coral Strand*"**

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### **Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012)**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Imperialist Nostalgia in Masters's *To the Coral Strand*" Mehmet Fikret Ararguç discusses nostalgia as a resource of identity formation. Ararguç argues that imperialist nostalgia is no innocent emotional attachment to the past; rather, it is an adaptation to changed circumstances and its discursive practices (i.e., eulogizing) evade responsibility. In addition to practices to alleviate or absolve repressed guilt about the past, they often relate to discourses of power and regret that the past is no more. This type of nostalgia is another neo-imperialist form of exploitation by (ab)using or generating fluid, dynamic, and ever-evolving identities. Ararguç suggests that in his autobiographical *To the Coral Strand* Masters attempts to cope with loss of status and identity following the end of British rule of India.

## **Mehmet Fikret ARARGÜÇ**

### **Imperialist Nostalgia in Masters's *To the Coral Strand***

In the nineteenth century, nostalgia appeared in both culture in general and in politics. This happened because viewed from one perspective, nostalgia appears to be "a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (Boym xiv) and as such as "a strategy of survival" (xvii). From another perspective, nostalgia becomes a "mental escape from the *present* to the *past* — a past colored by false, unreliable imaginings" (Smith 512; emphases in the original). The former approach emphasises the intersection between nostalgia's public and collective memories of the past and thus sees it as a "historical emotion" (Boym 10). The latter, in contrast, sees nostalgia as an emotional construct with escapist intention. Here nostalgia stands for a yearning for an imagined past which probably never existed. Nostalgia is revolutionary in that it is the rebellion of the nostalgic against time: "the nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology" yet by "refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition", she notes that the nostalgic nevertheless desires "to revisit time like space" (Boym xv). Here nostalgia can also be perceived as a pointless emotional expression for the irretrievable loss of an object of desire, inaccessible in time. Nostalgia's fixation on the unrecoverable gave way to see it as a psychiatric disorder or to accusations that it is an emotional disguise for a reactionary, one that tries to conceal a fear of reality and therefore of life itself.

Assuming that nostalgia encapsulates itself in a retrospective present is to see it as a sort of negative escapism; yet, viewing it as an endeavor of the imagination to depress and neutralize loss enables us to see it as a positive sentiment, one through which the past is never just the past but it is what makes the present tolerable. Nostalgia is not only concerned with the past or the present, there are even future oriented nostalgias" "nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future" (Boym xvi). Whatever the approach, nostalgia is less about the past than it is about the present and the future. That nostalgia bears a certain frustration for the present and that, as a reaction to the fear of a dystopic future, it creates a utopic past to be lived in the present, proves it again to be a revolutionary rather than a passive mood. Especially in literature, nostalgia is an easily (ab)used mood depending on whose hands it is in. As such a phenomenon, it would be wrong to see nostalgia as a naive or regressive tendency; rather it should be handled as an "ideologically charged construct" (Smith 515).

The mood that Renato Rosaldo terms "imperialist nostalgia" is an example of the kind of nostalgia that meshes with ideological discourse. Imperialist nostalgia bemoans the fact that a culture, a form of life, an environment, or a species has become or is about to become extinct. Yet, ironically, it is the perpetrator who laments. In this way, imperialist nostalgia brings to mind a strategy for innocence, one that seeks to cover up any complicity. Rosaldo emphasizes the inherent contradiction of this mood: "imperialist nostalgia revolves around a paradox: A person kills somebody and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature" (108). By associating imperialist nostalgia with domination, Rosaldo identifies it as a strategy of colonial agents who use "a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (108). Writers from ex-colonialist countries who could not reconcile themselves to the fact that their empire had fallen apart often make use of this colonial gesture and John Masters can be seen as such a writer. Considering the co-existence of pride and guilt in his autobiographical novel *To the Coral Strand* I argue that imperialist nostalgia motivated Masters to write his work. Masters's imperialist nostalgia is a response to an identity crisis caused by the handing over of India in 1947. *To the Coral Strand*, then, does not only aim to obliterate an individual or collective responsibility for British rule during the Raj, but at the same time it serves an individual cathartic purpose: it seeks the possibility to retain a post- or neo-colonial identity.

After the acquisition of independence, the Indian subcontinent was divided into two sovereign states which later became the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. However, much

bloodshed followed partition not only as the result of the division of territories and power which is even today much debated but also owing to the transfer of population between the two new states. People who lived in areas which were diverse with regard to religion migrated to areas where their coreligionists were the majority. During this process millions of people were uprooted and thousands were killed or experienced other extreme forms of violence or indignation (see, e.g., Pandea; Pandey). In Indian literature responses to this watershed in history varied from celebrations for the birth of a nation to the depiction of the horror and trauma surrounding partition. English approaches, in contrast, "completely negate the role of national movement" as a possible reason and by emphasizing that "Indian society had been divided in mutually antagonistic blocks" with no meeting point (Pandeya 155) and suggest that such a divide of the country was inevitable. Expressed otherwise, the English were responding to the causes which led to partition and, rather than seeing it as an adverse impact of colonial policy, like many Indians did, they depicted it as an outcome of India's socio-cultural structure. Therefore, the history surrounding partition, as well as the Raj, became a major thematic concern in English novels. Some writers revisited the past in order to seek expiation and relief from an uneasy conscience about their nation's former imperial rule (see, e.g., Bose xi-xii; 108-12), while others, unable to accept the reality of partition turned to history in order to re-experience the grandeur of their nation's imperial past.

Whether for literary compensation, consolation, or redemption, nostalgia is a means of sense-giving to the present. Thus many English writers, among them Masters, tailored nostalgic scenes of British India in conformance with their anxieties and their needs. Partition had a tremendous effect on Masters and was decisive not only in his retiring from the Indian Army in 1948 but also in his treatment of India and its people in his novels. Both of his novels, *Bhowani Junction* and *To the Coral Strand* directly deal with partition and reflect his deep attachment to India. The latter, however, offers a glimpse of the personal trauma Masters suffered because of partition. *To the Coral Strand* begins with Colonel Rodney Savage, a character based on Masters himself, watching a crowd revelling in debauchery on 15 August 1947, the day of partition. Masters crafted such an opening scene to suggest that the chaotic aftermath of partition was the natural outcome of rule without the English. The Colonel cannot give sense to the splitting of India because according to him his ancestors had worked hard to compose one country out "from a hundred countries" (16) and so the Colonel sees himself, and thus the English, as the owner of India and announces that if the Indians should take it over they should accept it as a gift (16). He adds, in an arrogant and provocative manner, that in such a case the Indians would only make an "unholy mess" out of it (16).

It is not surprising that *To the Coral Strand* displays attitudes that contradict the politics of imperialist nostalgia, since the predominant feeling that motivates Masters's works is the sense of pride he felt for his empire. However, such ethnocentric outbursts are generally seen in the initial chapters where the Colonel still tries to resist history. However his aggressive behavior diminishes gradually because of the imperialist nostalgic mood he assumes when he recognizes the gravity of the situation. In this case imperialist nostalgia under the form of imperialism, mourns the passing of what it itself deliberately has destroyed; yet, unwittingly it destroyed the very matter upon it depends for its own existence and thus imperialist nostalgia should be seen as a mask or new form of imperialism that appears at the very moment it recognizes a threat to its continuity.

English contact with ordinary Indians seemed to be more meaningful than the contact among the Indians themselves. Nevertheless, the English tried to keep a distance appropriate to a ruler and, at times, their rule included racial segregation. Imperialist nostalgia always offers a version of history that is stripped of guilt and in order to attain such a goal it generally benefits from romance, the "nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream" (Frye 186) and as such it provides ground for a literary realization of otherwise unrealizable desires of ideologically engaged writers. Masters's neo-imperialist fantasy was "an effort to recapture the glory that was the *raj* and to explore the possibilities of an Indian recall of their former English rulers" (Narayanan 28). Most of Masters's works were written right after partition at a time when even Indians could have seen an English recall possible. And even if not, such works offer a certain kind of satisfaction for Masters: to reacquire the lost sovereignty in India through literature. Thus, Masters embedded his plot within the narrative frame of the romance whose logic enabled him to construct a world in which the English are always welcomed and their rule appreciated. More importantly, this narrative form enabled Masters to achieve

one of the end-effects of imperialist nostalgia: to detach imperial rule from a racist logic and create a picture of the perpetrator as an innocent bystander (Rosaldo 108). *To the Coral Strand* feeds on Masters's imperial pride, hope, and fantasy but also his anxieties. Following the loss of India, Masters feels himself uprooted from the history and the country he claimed as his own (Masters, *Pilgrim Son* 30). And to cure this alienation, he, like his protagonist, embarked upon a quest of self-identity whose literary expression turned into an autobiographical novel. Masters, like his literary alter ego, was unable to attain a post-independence identity and his longing for a re-emplacement in India was consequently transformed into a sense of belonging or a search for home (*Pilgrim Son* 57). Fred Davis proposes nostalgia to be the remedy for such alienation: "If ... nostalgia is a distinctive way, though only one among several ways we have, of relating our past to our present and future, it follows that nostalgia (like long-term memory, like reminiscence, like daydreaming) is deeply implicated in the sense of who we are, what we are about, and (though possibly with much less inner clarity) whither we go. In short, nostalgia is one of the means – or, better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses – we employ in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (31).

Savage takes up several more-or-less unconnected roles in order to secure a post-independence identity: he runs a camp, becomes a hunter, rules a village like a tribal chief, acts as a consultant for the new Indian government, works as a night watchman, and becomes a military supervisor. He is a superbly drawn character who knows the "real India" and the Indian way of life in its entirety (*To the Coral Strand* 258). He shows that he knows it even more thoroughly than the Indians do when a local woman asks him whether there was anything he did not know about the country. This knowledge makes him indispensable to the new government which calls him in when they have trouble with a local tribe and ironically are only allowed to access their tribal territories under his accompaniment (29). The members of the tribe do not want their children to be educated and "join the modern world" (28) and so the Colonel intervenes to conduct negotiations with their chief. At the end it is agreed that the children should be educated in their own language at a local school (32). From his works it can be assumed that Masters favoured the uneducated Indians partly because he, like many other people in his time, believed the partition to be the result of the claims of the educated classes. Similarly the Colonel seems to blame the elite (all those groups or classes of people who were involved in the divide, actively or passively) for having changed and to praise ordinary people for having remained unchanged when he announces that they knew the Indians of the past, "the poor, the peasants, those who live in the woods and the mountains" (38).

The "new" country and its affairs seem to be beyond Savage's control and so in order to recover lost values he seeks to preserve a part of India with the people and the culture he was familiar with in the past. For this reason he decides to start a hunting camp in the forest where he thinks he could make a living, lead the kind of life he wants to live, and be his own master (62). Once the camp is founded, the Colonel claims moral responsibility (39) and protects the Indians and hunts for them during famine. However, in the course of the novel, it is understood that the Colonel's real intention in starting the camp was to attract tourists and "gain a lot of foreign exchange" (107). His emotional attachment also turns out to be related with "a peculiar sense of mission, the 'white man's burden,' where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones" (Rosaldo 108). The existence of the "other" is a prerequisite for imperialism to carry forward its agenda under the cloak of a supposedly civilizing mission. This mission enables imperialism to conceal its predatory aims but, ironically, its successful implementation would lead to the end of imperialism. As a result, the very moment imperialism recognizes such a threat, it begins in the form of imperialist nostalgia to eulogize what it intentionally altered or destroyed (Rosaldo 109).

When imperialist nostalgia eulogizes the "other" it seems also to manipulate the difference that was once so vital for imperialism's logo-centric acts of determinism. For example, the name of Masters's main character hints at such a stance. "Savage" is not only the name of the protagonist in *To the Coral Strand* but also of his characters in other novels (e.g., *Nightrunners of Bengal*, *The Deceivers*, *The Lotus and the Wind*, *Bhowani Junction*, *Coromandel*). All these novels feature members of the fictitious Savage family which claims to have lived in India for more than five generations. This family name provides Colonel Savage the ancestral lineage that entitles him to claim his roots to the country. Furthermore, it is these ties and his understanding of Indians and India which grant him

access to their private world and like a "savage" he participates in their sexual orgies but, at times, he also treats them "savagely" and even makes ethnocentric remarks about them. Obviously, the latter act contradicts the compassionate stance of imperialist nostalgia while the former risks "going native." However, Masters's solution is simple: whenever his protagonists "misbehave," they are drunk or suffer a temporary lapses of consciousness and thus they are, in a sense, excused.

Imperialist nostalgia is imperialism's new mask of innocence through which it tries to appeal to those who it was charged with vanquishing. Therefore, in my view, there are two types of imperialist nostalgia. One type is a guilt-driven impulse which still retains enough common sense to repent active or passive complicity. This type admits, although always implicitly, a responsibility and seeks ways to pay compensation. The other type of imperialist nostalgia also "regrets" the vanishing of a society but, ironically, it is the one which it had enjoyed exploiting to its utmost, but now regretfully recognized that hardly anything remained to keep on exploiting. This type through poses of reverence and sympathy seems to be caring and cherishing a certain form of life in order to save them from extinction. But, actually, its concern is to preserve that form for its commercial potential or just to conceal other profit-oriented activities. From such a viewpoint, many camps, reservations, sanctuaries, and other sites to preserve human and natural environments can also be seen as microcosms of neo-imperialism. In these places, if we pay the money, we are privileged to admire vanishing forms of life, assuage guilty consciences, and conceal complicity in destroying those forms of life. The Pattan Reserved Forest in *To the Coral Strand* becomes a typical site for such neo-imperialist exploitation and represents a small-scale parody of imperialism itself. In the camp nature, animals, the Indians with their culture are commodified and marketed and tourists behave as if they were allowed to do anything they want to if paying for it. They slaughter animals just to get trophies and while shooting recklessly they nearly kill an Indian woman and remain unmoved because the insurance covers such "accidents." The Colonel shouts angrily at his clients, which appears just like another imperialist nostalgic effort to reject personal guilt and to project it onto others. Actually the Colonl knew what was happening with the camp. Even before their arrival, the clients had been taking shape in his mind as intruders and he claims that with their arrival "peace would be broken" in Pattan Forrest and "rape would become final" (84).

On first view, *To the Coral Strand* only seems to be exposing Masters's pride but upon a closer inspection we realize that Masters's conscience was also pricked with a deeply embedded guilt. Savage, even if a bit late, realizes his faults, and also that together with the hunting camp he had lost the opportunity to preserve a part of old India: "I stood up, and exhilaration flowed in, replacing all other emotions. I thought of what was to be achieved. Was this not precisely the sum of my thoughts that dreadful day at the Pattan Rest House when I asked myself what we had done, to destroy the old India which my ancestors had found, and hand it over to the worst sort of mediocrity?" (128). However, as it is in romances, he is granted one last chance. The borders between India and Pakistan were not immediately drawn after partition and as a result both nations tried to annex as many territories as possible while many small places which were located between both countries struggled to maintain their independence. Savage is given "a chance to start again, to create and preserve instead of destroy" (128) when the fictitious principality of Chambal asks for his help to preserve its own sovereignty.

In her study of Anglo Indian and Indian English literature, Gomathi Narayanan argues that Masters's novels "seek an outlet either in outright denial of guilt or in making scapegoats of Indians for all the political ills of British India" (28). However, Masters never hesitates to accuse anyone just to deflect attention from himself. In the initial chapters of *To the Coral Strand* it is the Indians who are criticized and later those English who lived too little in India to be able to understand the country and finally England itself. Masters in his own autobiographical work claims that they (Anglo Indians) were "delegated by distant politicians elected by unconcerned and uninformed strangers" (English) but also that they nevertheless were "simply pressing India's interests ... against anyone else's, including Britain's" (*Pilgrim Son* 30). Thus, Colonel Savage accuses England of misrule in India when he decides to help in Chambal: "I feel that I have been given a second chance. For all the time we English have been here, certainly for the past fifty years, we seem to have been heading the wrong way. Now I've been given an opportunity to put that right" (*To the Coral Strand* 157). The transfer of guilt from the Indians to the English or its re-distribution among these is accompanied by the Colonel's emphasis on

his own Anglo Indian identity. Of course, "Anglo Indian" in its original meaning stands for all those British who were born in India is also used for Eurasians who are people of interracial descent. Victoria Jones, one of the female characters in the novel, is not Anglo Indian in the sense used above, but Eurasian. This "new" identity provides the Colonel a position from where he can with relative ease accuse England of having abandoned the Anglo Indian community. During its official reign in India England had created a particular kind of leaders from the Indian princes who appeared autonomous and powerful in their rule but actually were subject to England. These princes enjoyed a sovereignty that was granted to them because of their loyalty to England. Both the princes and the Anglo Indians had played a vital role in the maintenance of the empire but when set adrift by England they were also rejected by Indian society: "I got left over, me and five hundred rajahs. They, poor simple minded saps, went round waving treaties in which the Noble British Government guaranteed them their independence. They actually thought the Honest British Sailor would concern himself to see that those silly scraps of paper were honoured" (*To the Coral Strand* 216).

Along with his recovered Anglo Indian identity, Savage acquires another identity: that of a victim. The Anglo Indian question is a popular theme for Masters and especially in *Bhowani Junction* he deals with the problems the Anglo Indian community experienced during and after partition. Savage's imperialist nostalgia not only explores the possibilities to dodge responsibility but, since it is also triggered by a sense of guilt, it explores the possibilities for redemption or absolution. A closer look at the seemingly unconnected roles he assumed (night watcher, hunter, etc.), actually revealed these not unconnected, but associated with caretaking within that society. Likewise, he tries to expiate his guilt with his self-sacrificial engagement in Chambal. And even a much more effective expiation seems to be achieved when he fails in his mission because he is betrayed by the Indians themselves. Narayanan interprets this as the "betrayal of the betrayer" (70) and from an allegorical point of view: Savage serves as a scapegoat for England's shortcomings in India.

Forms of nostalgia are associated with social integration, and as such they seek adaptation or adjustment to changed circumstances by (ab)using or generating fluid, dynamic, and ever-evolving identities. *To the Coral Strand* is a romance and so the allegorical dimensions of Savage's love relations reveal his search for identity and, consequently, his yearning for social emplacement. His search for an identity unfolds around his love relationships with five women from different ethnic and social backgrounds. Janaki and Sumitra are Indians, Frances and Margaret are English and Victoria is Eurasian. Savage feels a real love towards Janaki who is married to a friend of his and he describes his love for Janaki as follows: "It was like having a lover, a married woman. You got her by force perhaps in the beginning-not rape-force, just power, and you didn't have to use it. Women like power because they need it. Yet they dislike themselves for liking it ... So part of her always hated you for that, and another part was flattered. You were strong and the husband wasn't. Then in time you fell in love, and there were enough times of physical ecstasy, power and sensuality fused, so that she fell in love too, a little. You thought it would go on for ever. But it wouldn't and her husband claimed her, softly, inevitably. You hadn't noticed it, but *the tide was going out*. She floated out and away. She had to" (42; emphasis in the original). Masters seems to be doubtful about the illegitimate relationship but nevertheless he stresses the superiority of his protagonist in order to produce an excuse. Considering the allegorical roles of the lovers, and Savage's own comment that the woman of his dreams were Janaki but also India (51), it can be inferred that Savage's love to Janaki represents the historical tie between England and India. Such a reading, then, would suggest that Masters's conscience was not entirely clear about the English presence in India. Savage and Janaki part reluctantly and she returns to her husband.

Frances, Savage's ex-fiancée is English. Because of her racial arrogance, she despises Indians and "cannot face the prospect of living in India" (*To the Coral Strand* 47). It is clear that she represents England and its lack of concern with Indian affairs. In other words, she represents those English whom Savage and many other Anglo Indian writers blame for being ignorant and incompetent in political affairs. Savage does not want to go with her to England but he claims that he could "stay physically faithful" to her in India (60). They break up because they are not able to fully understand each other. Another of Savage's lovers is Victoria, an Anglo Indian woman. Savage met her just before partition and their relationship is rather superficial. It is clear that Masters, out of his imperialist pride and fear of "going native" does not sympathize so much with Eurasians. His love of her is sexual and according

to him their relationship was "probably an attempt to avoid expulsion from India, [as] the psychologists would say" (47). Rani Sumitra of Kishanpur is the other Indian lover of Savage and reminds the actual Queen Rani of Jhansi: she remains one of India's most important historical figures, a legendary hero who led her troops against the British in the uprising of 1857, the first Indian War of Independence (see, e.g., Mahasweta). Her involvement in the uprising made her a national hero for Indians but an enemy for the English and as a result she became a subject to Orientalist stereotyping in English literary accounts (see Paxton 161). Like in many other imperial romances she is also involved in political intrigue and conspiracy in *To the Coral Strand*. Further, it is emphasized that she was adulterous and even had two abortions in Europe (289). Like Janaki, she is married to a friend of Savage and represents those Indians who resisted the English. Savage's relationship with her is again a sexual one and with time it transforms into hatred since she betrays him in his cause for Chambal. Ironically, she carries Savage's child and he claims that she means nothing to him, "except through the baby" (293). Owing to complications there is a risk to the life of the mother and thus the baby has to be aborted. This abortion represents Savage's Indian future and when he buries his dead daughter he is "burying his future" (316).

Savage's last love affair is with the English Margaret, his future wife. She is the only woman Savage did not have an affair with. As a nurse she cares for Indians and tries to understand them. The first time Rodney saw Margaret, he tried to seduce her and therefore she hated him at first, but with time "hate became love, despisal became respect, fear became worship" (232). She, like the typical romance hero, cares for him in his times of need and it is she who performs Sumitra's abortion. They go through many things together and when at the end of the novel Savage walks into the sea hoping to drown himself, she is willing to go with him. The death of Savage's child is inevitable because it is the only way he can throw off his ties to India and marry the "proper" English girl, as is necessary for the happy-ending in a romance. It also serves Savage's imperialist nostalgia because with this loss he expiates guilt and when he walks into the sea he is allegorically purged of all his imperialist sins.

To conclude, imperialist nostalgia appears to be a response to loss and displacement and as such it seeks adjustment to changing conditions. Through processes of re-identification it allows us to distance ourselves from the responsibility for a particular crime or offence that was consciously or unconsciously committed. As a result we feel guiltless or at least we try to appear so. Afterwards, under the mask of innocence, we eulogize what or who we destroyed and we are able to establish an atmosphere of trust. A well intentioned imperialist nostalgia does all this to salvage a guilty conscience but sometimes imperialist nostalgia is just a new form of imperialism that seeks new possibilities to keep on exploitation. This form of imperialist nostalgia is seen in the initial chapters of *To the Coral Strand* but with time Colonel Savage understands that he could not preserve such an imperialist tie with India and then tries to reintegrate himself into post-independent India. Masters like his autobiographical character failed to acquire a post-independence identity but then, out of his imperialist nostalgic urge for re-identification, he abandoned his Indian and English identity and applied for US-American citizenship. In his own words, Masters says that he, i.e., "the English fighting man became an American writing man" (*Pilgrim Son* 11) and attained a guilt-redeemed postimperial identity.

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